



The Music of Language – eBook 1

Helen Doron's Journey Towards a Methodology

The Origins of Discovery

I was born Helen Rachel Lowenthal on 5th November 1955.

I grew up in a family with an abundance of books. My mother had been training to be a pharmacist when she met my father, but in truth, she harboured the dream of being an English teacher and working with little children. Though she only started pursuing her teaching career when I was already a teenager, her interest in education affected me. She helped me with my reading, supplementing whatever I received in the classroom (those ubiquitous Janet and John books!), and managed to instil in me her great love of books. And love them I did — not just for the stories they told me and the adventures on which they carried me, but for their comforting heft, the crinkle of a turning page, even the smell of them. I remember poring over a book of children's names, reading each name, its origin and meaning.

When the books became damaged, I turned my hand at amateur book repair, laboriously rebinding them with paper and tape. I was good at reading, and could not comprehend a life without the companionship of books.

My father had left Germany with his parents and brother in 1933, as the rumblings of war were sweeping across Europe. His strongest influence on me was the compassion he showed to all living things. My mother, too, loved animals and was good with them, even earning the nickname 'Katzenkopf' in her family. Almost as far back as I can remember, we always had one cat and one dog. It was quite natural for me to grow up loving animals; one of my favourite things as a young girl was going to the London Zoo. The memory of those frequent outings is irrevocably interwoven in my mind with my parents' sense of justice and responsibility towards animals. My belief in the ethical treatment of all animals clearly stems from these early years, although I took it a lot further.

Another childhood influence was my paternal grandfather, my opa, a clever and good man. A savvy businessman, he had managed to move his business, a German brand that manufactured lighters, to England in 1928, a full five years before the family left. The company, Colibri of London, still exists, although it no longer belongs to our family. When I was in my early teens, I helped in the company shop, handling sales and even lending my hand in repairing the lighters. I grew to understand the balance between sharp business acumen and a strong sense of ethics, for my grandfather was not just a clever businessman, but a man who maintained a sterling reputation with his employees. He was true to principles. Years later, as I began to develop Helen Doron English, I felt the influence of my opa's entrepreneurial spirit and business sense.

Educational Grounding

I grew up in the Hampstead/Finchley region of north-west London. I attended a Montessori kindergarten (of which I have virtually no memory). I then attended a private





The Music of Language – eBook 1

primary school, a lovely place called Northbridge House, whose headmaster and owner was the wonderful Mr. Warwick James. The educational environment there was quite progressive, with learning in small groups, a friendly and supportive environment and a system that allowed children to advance at their own rate. If you did well in a subject, you could move up to another level, and since the curriculum was set up on a trimester basis, students could advance far more fluidly than in a regular school.

It was here that I had a youthful epiphany about the different levels of knowledge. I recall sitting in the classroom in the first grade, watching the teacher conduct a class with new students. She wrote on the chalkboard:

0 + 0 + 0 and asked, “How many is that?”

That’s silly, I thought. It is zero, of course. So imagine how startled I was when she answered the question herself: “Three!” It took me a moment to realize that this was, in fact, the way she had introduced things to me, just a few months before! She had first taught the concept of objects (those zeroes on the chalkboard could represent three objects), and had then introduced the more advanced concept of the value of zero. I was only five or six years old, and yet I suddenly grasped this sense of layers, and how information and knowledge can be peeled down to reveal different levels.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that I remember this event, because at Northbridge House, I became an absolute demon at maths. Together with another pupil, we were books ahead of the other students. I would follow my father around the house, begging him to write more equations so I could solve them!

I thought it was fun and my success reinforced my desire to continue.

Northbridge House had another important influence on me: it taught French and Latin. This was very unusual, as in the early 1960s in the UK, foreign languages were normally taught at secondary school level (starting at age 11), not primary school.

However, because of Northbridge House’s unusual curriculum, I started learning both French and Latin at the age of seven. When I look back, I realize that the methodology left a lot to be desired (no emphasis on, or methodology for, spoken French) and the learning could have been so much more effective, but nonetheless, I had three years of learning two foreign languages at primary school. In secondary school, we started from the beginning as few students had been exposed to French and Latin at the primary school level!

I was also introduced to the world of the performing arts. I loved singing. I had a loud and strong singing voice. A primary school teacher, Mr. Norman Platt, thought that I was talented and had the potential for a career in singing. I had already begun to play the piano at age five, and I continued with piano lessons through the highest level offered. The emphasis, however, was very much on theory and technique, and the piano never really touched my soul. (Come to think of it, I have probably only sat down at the piano a mere handful of times since my last lesson as a child.) But Mr. Platt encouraged me to sing and, at the age of ten, even singled me out for a solo spot in an amateur charity





The Music of Language – eBook 1

production of Noye's Fludde by Benjamin Britten. I played Mrs. Shem. I loved it! Mr. Platt told me to start training my voice when I reach the age of 15. Alas, it did not happen. One of my frustrations today is that I do not sing anywhere near as well as I would like to.

Prior to this, my mother had decided that I had poor diction. When I was about eight, my mother took me to elocution classes, which also included drama. I didn't take any dance classes, which is something I also regret. Indeed, I believe I am a frustrated dancer and singer. Nevertheless, I certainly enjoyed the arts, and that enjoyment and appreciation of creative expression has stayed with me until this day. In fact, as an adult, I not only started voice training, but also took up dance, and I still enjoy those weekly classes!

Back to the academic arena: while I continued to enjoy reading, I quickly discovered that maths and sciences were my favourite subjects. When I began my secondary school studies at Queen's College, London, I was the top of the class in all maths and sciences. At this point, it was quite clear that I was meant to be a scientist.

When I look back on those years, I realize what an exciting time it was in London! The colour and energy of the 1960s was in full swing, and London had become a cultural Mecca for some of the biggest celebrities. This all seemed quite normal to me, and it is only in retrospect that I can appreciate what an extraordinary time that was. For example, I remember tagging along with a little friend to a 'party'. My friend's cousin, who was older, had heard about a party that John Lennon and Yoko Ono were throwing on the Hampstead Heath, and took his little cousin and her little friend. There I was, at age ten, watching a screening of Yoko Ono's latest experimental art film, *Bottoms*, which I found quite distasteful. Unmindful of the famous people all around, I sat and made a daisy chain, which I then presented to John and Yoko.

They thanked me sweetly.

So there I was, a happy, busy child, thoroughly enjoying school and thriving in two areas that are usually seen as diametrically opposed: maths and science on the one hand, and music and the performing arts on the other. Who knows? I could have ultimately selected one of these paths and ended up a scientist or a performer. But that was not to happen.

Instead, at age eleven, my life was changed dramatically when my parents divorced. My father, who had been a loving, constant, reliable presence in my life, was suddenly gone. The contrast was dramatic — after he left, my sister and I saw him once a fortnight for lunch — a mere hour or two each time, compared to his previous constant presence. With the divorce came some economic compromise, and I was forced to leave Queen's College and transfer to the Henrietta Barnett grammar school. The change was terribly traumatic for me. Suddenly, I found myself struggling with what had formerly been my favourite and strongest subjects, as my new school was following a new, experimental system for maths and sciences. It was as if I had entered a play in the middle of the second act, and had no idea what had transpired before!





The Music of Language – eBook 1

This represented my second insight into education, because I saw first-hand the powerful effects of different teaching methodologies. At 13, I lacked the sophistication and knowledge to articulate this fully, but at some level, I knew it and understood it.

It is only in retrospect that I wonder if these two memories (these early insights about education) hold some clue — did they influence my later academic decisions, or did they simply reflect a natural empathy towards education?

So there I was, 13 (an awkward and challenging age for any girl at the best of times), in this new school where I no longer excelled in maths and sciences! I didn't manage to catch up and ultimately, I switched to languages, with history and economics. Nonetheless, that early love of maths and sciences remained with me, and played an important role in my later studies at university.

My secondary school years were significantly less cheery than my early experiences in primary school. Teen years can be turbulent at the best of times, and the changes within my family did not help. Even so, secondary school was the source of another significant early influence for me; namely, sixth form French.

I had a teacher, ironically named Mrs. French, who seemed to loathe me. She constantly put me down and told me that I would never be any good at French. She was certainly not what you could call an inspiring teacher! I had enough of a stubborn streak, however, that I was determined not to let her 'get' me. To that end, in the summer before my upper sixth form (what would be 12th or senior year in American high schools), I convinced my friend Laila to go with me to attend a summer study programme in France. What a marvellous adventure! I recall showing up bright and early the first morning (I was always quite serious about my studies, even on a summer course where few other students bothered to show up), and discovering to my dismay that everyone spoke English! How in the world was I to learn French in this environment? I looked around the campus (the study programme was on a university campus in La Rochelle) and tried to find some French speakers. Thus I discovered Michel, the sports instructor, the only French speaker on the campus, who was lovely and spoke no English. Through sheer necessity, I used (and improved) my French, and by the end of the summer, it was quite good, indeed! Clearly, despite Mrs. French's grim predictions, I improved my ability in French (though I doubt that many of the other students returned from the programme with the fluency gained from having a French boyfriend!). Michel and I remain good friends to this day.

I returned to my upper sixth form year and still had to face the dour Mrs. French, who grudgingly admitted that my French had improved. Luckily, we had outside examiners for A levels, so impartial strangers were able to prove that my French was, indeed, excellent. I earned a double A (A for speaking, and A for the written exam).

The seeds were all there: a sense of ethical behaviour, love of maths and sciences, some artistic talent (including an ear for music), a developed ability in languages and a hyperawareness of educational methods. I entered Reading University in 1973; I had been accepted into the French programme and intended earning a B.A. in French. In reality, majoring in French was a merely a default choice for me; I didn't have any real





The Music of Language – eBook 1

sense of what I wanted to study, let alone what I wanted to do with my life. I just knew that I wanted to earn a degree.

Reading University had a policy requiring students to study three subjects in the first two trimesters. I attended the introductory talks on many different subjects in my quest for additional subjects. When I heard Professor Palmer lecture on Linguistic Science, I was stunned. This was one of those ‘wow’ moments that can change your life’s direction. I’d never heard of Linguistic Science before, but the lecture was fascinating. I immediately added Linguistic Science and English Literature to French in my first year studies.

Linguistic Science combined aspects of scientific measurement that the analytical side of my brain loved, along with the emotional side of language, with all its complexity and inconsistency. Linguistic Science had the validity of hard sciences, with factual, measurable physiological reality of human sounds, but it also embraced the unknown and mysterious sea of human brain function. (To this day, we understand but a tiny fraction of the latter.)

This was the heyday of linguistics, and Reading University was the major UK linguistics centre of the day. Indeed, David Crystal was Head of Department for part of the time I was studying there. The classes were amazing, and I was challenged and stimulated to the point where I could not give them up. At the end of the two trimesters (that is, the time during which freshman students had to study two other subjects in addition to their major), I sadly returned to a diet of all French. I stuck it out for five days before realising that I simply had to study linguistics.

I jumped on my bike and rode frantically to the Department of Linguistic Science to implore them to accept me as a joint honours degree candidate. They agreed and I became, as David Crystal calls himself, a ‘born-again linguist’. I changed to a double major (Linguistic Science and French) and ultimately earned my B.A. with Dual Honours in 1977.

Among my Linguistic Science courses was a course in Child Language Acquisition taught by Paul Fletcher. This ultimately became the most relevant course for my future, as it was to lay the foundations of the future Helen Doron English.





The Music of Language – eBook 1

